

# The Attitude of Jewish Sephardic Ladino Writers in the *El Maccabeo* Journal in Thessaloniki at the Beginning of the Twentieth Century towards the Situation of the Jews in the Various Parts of the Diaspora

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Received: June 15, 2020

Accepted: July 16, 2020

Online Published: July 20, 2020

doi:10.11114/jets.v8i8.4934

URL: <https://doi.org/10.11114/jets.v8i8.4934>

## Abstract

The contribution of the Sephardic-Jewish communities to historic-literary processes shaping the image of the Jewish people was also expressed in periodicals. Ladino-speaking writers wrote in important newspapers in the Balkan lands and Eretz-Israel, and also published and edited their own newspapers. The purpose of this article is to introduce the topics featured in the *El Maccabeo* journal – published in Thessaloniki as an annual in the early twentieth century (1914-1931) – that discuss, identify and demonstrate solidarity and empathy with the situation of the Jews in other countries, particularly Europe, and compare their situation to that of the Jews in Thessaloniki. It can be learned from reading *El Maccabeo* that Sephardic Jews were well acquainted with the situation faced by the Ashkenazic Jews in their various communities, and their feelings about their Ashkenazic brethren wavered between pity and respect. They viewed them as their brothers with the phrase “our brothers” featuring in almost every article.

**Keywords:** Sephardic-Jewish, Ladino-speaking writers, Ladino newspapers, Zionist journals, *El Maccabeo* journal, Thessaloniki

## 1. Introduction

The Jews of the Eastern lands and Sephardic-Jewish communities made a great contribution to the historic-literary processes that shaped the image of the Jewish people and led to the establishment of the State of Israel (see, for example, Cohen, 2002, p.13).

This contribution was also expressed in periodicals. Sephardic-Jewish, Ladino-speaking writers for Ladino newspapers wrote on two planes – in important newspapers in the Balkan lands and Eretz-Israel, as well as their own newspapers as publishers and editors. These periodicals were not necessarily Zionist in content, but a substantial number of Zionist journals did exist (Betzael, 1997).

The purpose of this article is to introduce the topics featured in the *El Maccabeo* journal – published in Thessaloniki as an annual at the beginning of the twentieth century (1914-1931) – that discuss, identify and demonstrate solidarity and empathy with the situation of the Jews in other countries, particularly Europe, and compare their situation to that of the Jews in Thessaloniki.

## 2. Literature Review

### The Background to the Growth and Development of the Ladino Press

The Jewish press in its various languages served as a mouthpiece for two generations of the masses in the Diaspora, and was involved with their day-to-day problems (Gilboa, 1992; Govrin, 1990; Hel, 1975; Kressel, 1964; Levi, 1982; Matitahu, 1990; Mevorach, 1980; Nahshon, 1989; Rappel, 1980; Shmuelevitz, 1993). Lacking a government organization or common platform uniting the entire people, during the height of its success – from the early twentieth century until World War II – this press served as an expression of, and faithful guide to, Jewish public opinion, responsible for creating the nation's nationalist and spiritual image, and a bridge between the various Jewish communities. The Jewish press reached its peak between the two world wars. After years of suffocation, great communal-cultural forces erupted after having lain dormant in the Jewish communities. The Jewish press seized its new-found freedom before anyone had even granted it. Despite the poverty and hardship, hundreds of organizations, clubs, libraries and political parties emerged during this time. The world lived in a flurry of ideological and communal awakening, particularly after the Balfour Declaration in 1917 (Gothelf, 1976, p.7). The newspaper reviewed the

changing reality for its readers, offering commentary and organizational tools to understand the significance of the new events in the context of the group's consensus and cultural tradition (Blondheim, 1997). It should be remembered that the Jewish press's rising circulation and standards were the result of great changes then taking place within the nation: a nationalist and socialist arousal, the awakening of the masses, the broadening of the spiritual horizons of some of the Jewish communities followed by a great fervour to know about events in the outside world, and the masses becoming organized in political and professional frameworks (Hel, 1975, p.17). The same mergence and consolidation processes within other nations also affected the life of the Jews. These processes erected both barriers and bridges between the various Jewish communities (Dinur, 1955, p.49).

The Jewish newspaper was more than a source of information and entertainment. Its readers not only searched for news items and sensational pieces, but also information about their civic rights, encouragement regarding their struggle for existence, consolation during times of trouble and distress, and guidance for the future (Hel, 1975, p.17). The Diaspora Jewish press filled a unique role. It served as a faithful herald for the interests and wishes of the Jewish masses and shaped Jewish public opinion. The newspaper helped the Jews hold their heads high, eliminated apathy, and served as a kind of institution and guide to fight for their rights (Gothelf, 1976, p.8). The appearance of Jewish newspapers was one of the most blatant signs of modernization (Bartal, 1994). Writing for the purpose of publishing articles, and consumption of a newspaper by readers, were new phenomena showing both the increasing influence of European communicative publications within Jewish society, and the great changes in Jewish social organization and cultural habits.

Even while physically dispersed, Jews enjoy nationalist unity among their various groups (Dinur, 1955, p.1). Indeed, Diaspora Jews maintained various reciprocal connections. The connections were religious, connected with Torah study, familial, social, economic, and to a certain extent – even organizational. Far beyond those connections, there was a constant feeling of Jewish unity that encompassed all Diaspora Jewry. With its very existence, the Jewish press linked the different Jewish communities during a period when there was still no intergroup institution or organization.

Menachem Blondheim (1977, p.63) studied the Jewish press as a researcher of mass media. His article reveals similarities and a continuum between the traditional sermon and the newspapers, and he suggested that studying the connection between the two could contribute to creating a broad outline for defining the study of Jewish newspapers as an institution for evaluating its historical significance (Ilan, 2002). Blondheim (p.75) determined the Jewish press was the dynamic arena for expression of collective identity and shared historic awareness – the same arena which the sermon had served for many previous generations.

The second half of the nineteenth century increasingly saw newspapers in Jewish languages – Hebrew, Yiddish, Judeo-Arabic, and Judaeo-Spanish – alongside Jewish newspapers in European languages (Bartal, p.160). The Jewish language newspapers preceded those in European languages. The very choosing of a Ladino newspaper instead of its Greek or Turkish rival expressed awareness of the ideological value of using that language and viewing it as a factor in social identification, along with acceptance of the use of Hebrew letters for secular purposes. The Yiddish or Judaeo-Spanish newspaper was published by the Jewish social elite as a means of “educating” broader sections of society that had not yet had the opportunity of absorbing the light of Western culture.

### **The El Maccabeo Periodical**

The *El Maccabeo* periodical was founded by the Maccabi physical education society and published between 1914-1931 as a literary annual. Its editor was Avraham Shmuel Recanati, a member of the community committee, leader of the Revisionist Party in Greece, deputy mayor of Thessaloniki, editor of the French *Pro Israel* newspaper, and a representative at the Zionist congresses. The crowning glory of his public activity in Thessaloniki was organizing the mass emigration of the city's Jews to Israel, during 1931-1933.

*El Maccabeo* had extremely varied content. The first pages of each volume were generally dedicated to a synopsis of the previous year – the situation of the Jews in the Diaspora and Thessaloniki, with the Diaspora Jews referred to as “our brothers”.

After the comprehensive review of “the state of our brothers in the Diaspora” there were articles on different topics, such as various organizations, anti-Semitism, the Land of Israel, Ashkenazic and Sephardic Jews, Zionist sector activists, articles in favour of the nationalist-Zionist idea as a solution to all troubles, oppression and decrees against Jews worldwide, various reports, obituaries, the Zionist congresses as well as the countries where the Zionist idea had already gained popularity, such as England and America, and most importantly – the situation in the Land of Israel.

### **3. Findings and Discussion**

#### **Encouraging Aliyah to Eretz-Israel**

In the 1915 edition, Hovev Zion praises the agricultural settlement in the Land of Israel. He begins by describing the terrible economic situation of the Jews of the Diaspora who are forbidden from working in almost any trade and argues that

we cannot wait until the situation improves, anti-Semitism lessens, or the countries become more tolerant of the Jews:

Half a million Jews are fighting for foreign countries... Who are they dying for? Thousands of widows and orphans have been left destitute... Jew! Arise and take your fate in your own hands... Leave the ghettos... your homeland of Zion is waiting for you and crying for her lost children. Return to work the land, as did so many past generations. (p.23)

In the 1924 volume, David Florentine writes, as part of a review of George Eliot's novel, *Daniel Deronda*, that the rich Jews did not want to leave their castles in Europe and live in Jerusalem, but he was not writing about them. He emphasized that he is referring specifically to those men of spirit, who grow from poverty, a kind of brave modern Maccabi who will fight the enemies, "and they are those who need to immigrate to Eretz-Israel".

Florentine raises a sensitive issue in his writing regarding the class gap in Thessaloniki in particular, and Europe in general. It can be assumed he did not know at the time of writing that the World Zionist Organization actually preferred the immigration of those with capital, for both demographic and economic reasons – since this was "net" immigration that took place outside the limited quota of the immigration authorities. Of no less importance, the capital the immigrants brought with them improved their economic absorption ability and allowed the immigration of other Jews who were workers.

In the same volume, Siman Tov Yekuel writes critically about both the Thessalonikan Jews and their connection with the Land of Israel, and the Land of Israel and its connection with the Jews of Thessaloniki. Criticising the Jews of Thessaloniki, he noted that the phenomenon of Jews preparing to return to their land can be seen throughout the Jewish world, aside from the Jewish-Sephardic world that remained as this "tail of nationalist awakening". Sephardic Jews must arouse themselves, writes Yekuel, and participate in the Zionist organization; they can communicate better with the Arabs of Eretz-Israel since they are also *Mizrahim*. There must be organization from a Zionist viewpoint to return to the cradle of the Jewish nation – the State of Israel:<sup>1</sup> "Who of all the peoples of the East will sound the call of the *shofar* [ram's horn] to awaken Sephardic Jewry?"<sup>2</sup>

Comparing these Jews to those in other communities who were hurrying to immigrate to the Land of Israel, Yekuel attempts to spur on the Jews of Thessaloniki to a larger emigration movement. One of his practical considerations was that the Jews of Thessaloniki would be able to communicate more effectively with the Arabs of the Land of Israel since they were also *Mizrahim*. This declaration indicates certain naivety or ignorance, since the Jews of Thessaloniki were closer in their lifestyle, customs, and culture to the Jews of Europe than those of the East in the Muslim countries.

He adds that the community in Thessaloniki, the metropolis of the East, is obliged in these times of great nationalist endeavours to take an active part in the Zionist movement: "Thessaloniki, that was always the first community to gloriously shine among all the communities of the East, is it not obligated to interest itself in the revival of Sephardic Jewry?" (*El Maccabeo*, 1924, p.33).

With this statement, Yekuel attempts to elevate the importance of the Thessalonikan Jewish community and transform it into a community leading the realization of the Zionist vision.

In the 1925 volume, Haim Y. Levi responds to the complaints of the immigrants who had returned to Thessaloniki due to their difficulties in settling the Land and the poverty in Tel Aviv:

If Tel Aviv was rich like Holland or Belgium it would be so crowded that there wouldn't be room for them. The poverty in the Diaspora is not improving, but rather getting worse daily. Eretz-Israel needs Jews to become a wealthy land, and the Jews need Eretz-Israel to become a happy nation.

Levi emphasizes the symbiotic relationship between the Jews' need for the Land of Israel and the Land's need for the Jews – that will bring riches to the Land and happiness to the Jews. His writing shows his familiarity with and understanding of the economic situation in other countries, such as Holland and Belgium.

Rahamim Asio sent a letter from Tel Aviv to the 1931 volume regarding the second Maccabiah Games. The Maccabiah had always been an event in which young Jews from around the world met and formed social ties through sport, through lively discourse on nationalism. Asio writes that the Maccabiah is a good opportunity to visit the Land of Israel and see the blessed activity that is going on there, while also raising morale after the latest riots by the Arabs there: "Within a short time the pioneers – including young people but also the elderly and children – have built towns on the sand dunes

<sup>1</sup> Or as the writer writes, "Palestina".

<sup>2</sup> The characteristic style of the *El Maccabeo* writers should be noted here – awakening, sounding a *shofar* of awakening, sounding the *shofar* of Redemption, all motifs that recall the coming of the Messiah.

and turned deserts into gardens that bear sweet fruits”, concludes Asio in the final volume of *El Maccabeo*. And his request to the Thessalonikan audience remains a voice crying in the wilderness. Ten years later this community was destroyed – a community that, aside from a few individuals, did not hurry to heed the call of those writing about immigration to Eretz-Israel, or perhaps they did hurry but external factors also hurried to thwart such attempts.

Francis writes in the 1926 volume:

We need to encourage England to realize its mandate in Palestine... The Arabs have already come to terms with the fact that Palestine will be Jewish... They are becoming weaker by the day thanks to Jewish immigration... We need to have faith, because it is work that requires patience. (pp. 18-19)

This paragraph includes the assumption that the Arabs will happily welcome the immigrants since they “have already come to terms with the fact that Palestine will be Jewish”. Francis emphasizes that “We need to encourage England to realize its mandate in Palestine...” and thereby offers a spark of hope to the Jews of Thessaloniki that they can influence and make change in areas of politics and state.

### **Encouragement of Agriculture**

In the 1915 volume *Hovev Zion* argues that small businesses would not save the Jewish nation.

The fact that the six million Jews of Poland have nowhere to live has no parallel on this earth. In the Land of Israel the children will be educated in Jewish schools without Christians, not like here.

And he adds a warning:

It's true that agriculture does not make a person rich. The Jews of Eretz-Israel live modestly. It will take a long time until the first pioneers in the Land of Israel harvest the first fruits of their land, and only those who have patience are suited to till the soil, but eventually he becomes an owner of land that he will bequeath to his children. Only working the land will restore the health of the Jews that was stolen from them in the dark, dirty ghettos.

*Hovev Zion* includes a very significant argument for encouraging emigration to the Land of Israel and returning to agriculture – health. Meaning, working the land will improve the immigrant's physical health, as well as also being the physical and sporting activity encouraged by Maccabi. *Hovev Zion* also indirectly supports this ideology of nurturing the body by working the land, and also complains about the six million Polish Jews who wander from one place to another – a kind of prophecy that would eventually be realized some twenty years later with the destruction of this community.

### **Reports about Anti-Semitism against Jews in the Diaspora**

In the 1916 volume, author Yitzhak Refael Molho notes that despite the generally poor situation of the Jews throughout the world – the poverty and many war orphans – 50 Jewish representatives had been selected to the “New Hellenistic Room” (name of the government). The anti-Semitic press in Greece tried to halt this move, which was followed by blood libels in Corfu. Molho reports that it was only thanks to government kindness that this storm abated. He is also pained by the general situation of the Jews who are sacrificing themselves in wars of other nations and who suffer discrimination in all areas. He reviews instances of anti-Semitism in Poland, Russia, and England, and concludes that nationalist revival is the solution. The main motive for Molho's words is presenting the problem and its solution as one unit, leading the reader to the obvious conclusion that no other solution exists. Molho's writing makes it sound like he was very familiar with the situation of the Jews in Poland, Russia, and England, and aware of the anti-Semitism in these countries.

In the 1920 volume, Yosef Uziel writes that 1917 would be remembered as the year of the Balfour Declaration, the year that paved the way to redemption. In contrast, 1919 would be remembered as the year of the greatest pogroms and bloodshed the Jewish nation had seen since the Middle Ages – the cities of Poland were filled with rivers of Jewish blood.<sup>3</sup> Jews were exiled from their homes, women were mercilessly raped and then murdered, and even in Ukraine,

<sup>3</sup> The Balfour Declaration and the events that followed, culminating in the granting of the Mandate for Palestine to Britain, strongly influenced the Zionist movement in Thessaloniki. Extensive Zionist activity included all ages and types of Jews (Reuven, 1984, 97). As already noted, the Balfour Declaration was a public expression of the British government's favorable position towards Zionist aspirations. The Declaration was signed as a letter, composed on behalf of the entire British government and sent by the Foreign Secretary, Arthur James Balfour, to Lord Lionel Walter Rothschild, one of the leaders of the Anglo Jewish community, and ratified by the Council of League of Nations in 1922. The Balfour

where Jews had enjoyed freedom and spoke Yiddish freely, that year was catastrophic. The government changed and the Cossacks, who attacked the Jews even more than in Poland, ruled. The worst disorders were in Proskurov (Khmelnitskyi), where four thousand Jews, including schoolchildren, were massacred. “At this point the Zionist movement began to awaken”, writes Uziel, and lists the countries where the awakening had begun as Holland, Belgium, Norway, Denmark, and England.

### Reports about Zionist Development in Various Communities

In the 1918 volume, Yosef Uziel writes of his impressions from his meeting with Dr. Marmorek and his wife in their home, and notes there are two kinds of Zionists – the practical Zionists, who prefer immediate action, and the political Zionists, who prefer to wait patiently and act wisely.<sup>4</sup>

“There is synthesis between the two groups”, writes Uziel. “Chaim Weizmann leads political Zionism and he will personally lay the cornerstone of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. This man, who was Herzl’s greatest opponent, has become the most practical Zionist”, he emphasizes. Uziel’s words display several dialectic trends that characterized the Zionist movement in general. It can be presumed that Uziel cited these opinions to also impart legitimacy to political Zionist pluralism in Thessaloniki.

In the same volume, Ben Zion (a pseudonym) compares Zionism in America and Thessaloniki. He begins with Zionism in America and, with the aid of precise tables, outlines the number of members, sums contributed, and so on. He later moves to that of Thessaloniki and argues that the situation was satisfactory until the great fire – the organizations were active and large sums were donated. But, in the wake of the fire “the young people who were members of the Zionist organizations were scattered widely”, and for three months no one could talk about resuming regular Zionist activity. The members of the Zionist organizations helped rehabilitate the fire victims and were not emotionally available for any kind of Zionist activity. For example, bread distribution was prioritized as a matter of life or death. The Zionist organizations began to gradually resume their ongoing activity in Thessaloniki, and Ben Zion ends with the hope that all the troubles the community had endured would be preparation for a national future in the Land of Israel.

The 1920 volume includes Yosef Uziel writing that the situation of Zionism in Bulgaria was good, and that the Bulgarian-Palestinian Bank had been founded with an enormous amount of capital; in Romania the Jewish problem remained unsolved, and in America, “it is simply incredible to see the large, rich Jewish community there harnessed to the Zionist idea”.

He notes further that Jewish representatives had been sent from all countries to establish a political-Zionist committee in Paris, under the leadership of Weizmann, Sokolov and Ussishkin, that that year would see the establishment of the Jewish Federation of Greece, and he hopes the year would see “the fulfilment of all our hopes” (*El Maccabeo*, 1920, p.8).<sup>5</sup>

Viewing such articles in the light of the times and sociopolitical background against which they were written, we can identify the writers’ emotions and the techniques used to impart those emotions to their readers. They began with general background about another place, noting how good life was there or how people were greater activists for Zionism, and then moved on to talking about Thessaloniki to inspire the readers to change.

The 1925 volume also includes David Yitzhak Florentine’s review of the previous year. He noted that 1924 had been a year of the realization of the Zionist idea, the Balfour Declaration was recognized even in anti-Semitic countries, and even the Arabs of Palestine had begun to understand that it was in their greater interest to cooperate with the Zionist movement. Florentine also writes that Zionism had also been successful thanks to the general improvement in the international political situation, and this had been felt particularly by the Jews of Russia who were able to freely immigrate to Eretz-Israel. However, he also notes that the Jewish Sephardic communities in Morocco and Tunisia had also begun to wake up, but it was a slow process due to the lack of Zionist education in these places: “The Zionist leaders are not putting their full efforts into the countries where the Sephardic Jews live” (*El Maccabeo*, 1920, p.7). According to Florentine, despite the decline in Zionist activity in Thessaloniki for this reason, the number of immigrants to Eretz-Israel from Thessaloniki must rise irrespective of the Zionist leaders and their activity.

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Declaration marked an important political achievement for Zionism and granted the Jews international recognition (Braverman, 1990, 45).

<sup>4</sup> Dr. Alexander Marmorek (1865 – 1923) was born in Galicia, studied medicine in Vienna and was involved in medical research at the Institut Pasteur in Paris. He was a Zionist activist, close to Herzl, and the Vienna representative at Zionist congresses.

<sup>5</sup> In 1919, the General Zionist Federation was established in Greece, during the time that the authorities began to restore the city. The Federation, led by Dr. Moshe Kofinas, was involved in organizational activity and published various items including the official Judeo-Spanish journal, *La Esperanza* (the hope), and *Yisrael* (Benbassa & Rodrigue, 1995, p.146).

In the same volume, R.L. writes an article about Zionism and briefly sketches the Zionist leaders: Ussishkin speaks about the need to speak Hebrew, Weizmann about the need for an economically independent Jewish state from Dan in the north to Beersheba in the south, and Aaronsohn says that Dan to Beersheba is not the entire country, “and in the end, all of them stand together and sing Hatikvah” (*El Maccabeo*, 1920, p.11). The words of this anonymous author clearly show the effort made to bridge the gaps between the different Zionist views.

The above reveals two kinds of writers in *El Maccabeo* – those who believed that Thessalonikan Zionism was flourishing, and those critical of the Zionist leadership in the city who argued that they were not doing enough to aid Zionism. It would seem the truth lay somewhere in the middle – activity and how much is done are relative, and a bystander can always feel it was possible to do more, particularly someone committed to his journalistic truth and who views his writing as a social-ethical mission. The words of the *El Maccabeo* authors who wrote about the comparison between the “wretchedness of our Zionist activity as compared to that of our brethren in Europe”, can be understood in light of the fact that other Middle Eastern communities of the time are described as submerged in depressing materialism and lacking high-level cultural-spiritual aspirations (Benbassa, 1996, p.249).

Moreover, intervention on the part of Western Jewry greatly increased the instability of the communal institutions that had already been somewhat unstable. The Jews of Europe examined Mizrahi Jewry according to strict criteria, judged them in light of their own experiences, and did not always consider the uniqueness of the Middle Eastern reality. Since Ottoman Jewry did not possess the vitality needed to take its fate into its own hands and create its own dynamic without outside partners, it drew what it needed to strengthen itself and survive from the ideologies and concrete achievements of these partners (Benbassa, 1996, p.249).

### **Relations between Sephardic and Ashkenazic Jews as Reflected in the Journal**

In the 1920 volume David Benbenishti writes warmly about the activity of Ashkenazic Jews in contrast to that of the Sephardic Jews. He noted that the Ashkenazi Jews emphasized the language, literature, and practical work in the Land of Israel:

They have laid the foundations for our revival and begun to strengthen the happenings of our national independence. In contrast, the Sephardic Jews have not taken an active part during this time in any kind of work and are only concerned about material interests. The Sephardic Jew defined himself as a Jew when he kept the religious commandments and mentioned the name of Zion in his prayers. He is an expert in talk about Zionism, but up until this day Sephardic Jewry has no Hebrew organization. We only talk about Zionism, but do not sacrifice ourselves for the ideal, while our Ashkenazic brothers are waiting for us to stretch out our hand to the nationalist work and the Sephardic pioneers, but in vain. And it is only our education that is guilty, since we are taught from an early age to produce economic profits and not intellectual ones. For this reason, we have also not produced any leading literary figure like the Ashkenazi Jews have, aside from several novelists.

He then goes on to list the advantages of the Sephardic Jews over the Ashkenazic ones. He believed the young Thessalonikans were not limited to small businesses in the Ottoman Empire, and enjoyed financial autonomy. They therefore developed in all fields of work and industry and thus have an advantage over the Ashkenazic Jews.

Labour strengthened them and their spirits, while the Ashkenazic Jews were being humiliated in an Exile that broke them in body and spirit. The Land of Israel needs the Sephardic Jew in the building of the motherland to develop industry, agriculture, seamanship and fishing. Sephardic Jews can greatly help the productive side of settling the Land, since they like working and are of industrious character. Benbenishti ends with his primary message – the Ashkenazic Jews are those directing everything concerning the Land of Israel, and the Sephardic Jews have no influence at all. They must also be “the life and soul” of administration. From Benbenishti’s point of view, the Sephardic Jews should learn assertiveness and initiative from the Ashkenazic Jews, and as soon as they learn these traits they will be able to contribute in other areas.

Haim Y. Levi writes in the 1925 volume in reply to claims by Thessalonikan Jews who had emigrated to Eretz-Israel and returned to Thessaloniki because it was difficult for them to adjust to the difficult conditions there: “After seeing the spirit of sacrifice of our Ashkenazic brethren, I am left with no doubts regarding the flourishing spirit of our future motherland” (p.30).

Unlike the other authors and without any complaint or comparison, Levi admits in his article that salvation will come through the Ashkenazim.

In that same 1926 volume, Eliyahu Francis writes in another article that the Ashkenazic Jews did not initially gain a

good impression of the Sephardic Jews. They thought the Sephardic Jews had come to be supported by the *chaluah* money, like the Sephardic Jews in Jerusalem. Until Sephardic Jews from Bulgaria, Thessaloniki, and Serbia, known for their strong work ethic, arrived and corrected the negative impression. “The more families settle from the Balkans, the more quickly the differences will vanish”, writes Francis. “One land, one people, one language – this is the ideal. As soon as both Ashkenazim and Sephardim speak only Hebrew, there will be no differences between the two communities”.<sup>6</sup>

We can see the great aspiration of the *El Maccabeo* writers for the Jewish community of Thessaloniki to be somewhat transformed so as to resemble another Jewish community where Zionism was flourishing more – as we saw above – this could be America, Bulgaria, or any other nearby or far-away community. The idea was to take an example and implement it.

Part of the intense process of searching for an independent identity – connected to shaping the State of Israel’s future character – of Sephardic Jewish society, was the comparison with the Ashkenazic Jewish society. The State of Israel was established by pioneers from Central and Eastern Europe, but also created on the eastern shore of the Mediterranean Sea. The clash between the state’s European and Middle Eastern character created many conflicts between the two societies. The authors who wrote in *El Maccabeo* about the relationship between the two sectors – the Sephardic Jewish and Ashkenazic Jewish societies – raise interesting multicultural questions.

### Reports about Development of Transportation in Eretz-Israel

Eliyahu Francis writes in the 1926 issue:

Travel time between the Eretz-Israel communities today is very short. There are two trains to Egypt and two to Damascus every day. And one can travel from one place to another by automobile too. There are 40 bus lines between the various cities, a direct bus from Haifa to Baghdad, and a bus line to the port of Beirut. One can conduct business with Teheran through Haifa (p.16).

Francis describes a historical situation with financial, commercial, and human communications between Eretz-Israel and Persia, Syria, and Iraq.

### Reports about Anti-Semitism towards Jews in the Diaspora

Milan Freiburger writes an article in the 1929 volume, brought to strengthen the Jewish community in Thessaloniki with the story of another community who fought and were victorious.<sup>7</sup> The article begins by describing the situation of the Jews in the Diaspora – the last vestiges of the previous world war had not yet faded, but the Jews were already being accused of responsibility for its dreadful results because they had been indifferent to its consequences while serving in the military. The Jews, who had themselves suffered from the war by losing their loved ones, were demoralized by these accusations. Therefore, the young people felt the need for physical education alongside spiritual education, and

<sup>6</sup> It should be remembered that from the 1880s and onwards, Eretz-Israel changed from a holy land where Jews immigrated to pray and die, to a land of immigration, the ideological and real object of yearning of groups of Eastern European immigrants. Ashkenazic and Sephardic communities lived beside each other in the Land of Israel, with the veteran Sephardic community (including the Navon, Mani, Hedaya, Valero and Oplatka families) occupying important economic and social positions during the Ottoman and British Mandatory periods. The relationship between Jewish ethnic groups became a status-related problem following the immigration of Yemenite Jews at the beginning of the twentieth century. Most immigrants from Eastern lands were not accepted as equals among the veteran residents, and their absorption period became one of trauma in their lives and work. The Sephardic Jews were gradually transformed from a high-income and high-class group into a sector on the margins, pushed to the edge of the sociocultural world. See Shaked (1998, p.363). It should be noted that already during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that a group of predominately Sephardic young *maskilim* from families from the ultra-Orthodox Old Yishuv in Jerusalem, the most prominent of whom were Avraham Shalom Yahuda and David Yellin, organized themselves to oppose the contemptuous attitude on the part of the new immigrants towards the Arabs and the Old Yishuv. In other words, these local young people united in an effort to protest the behavior of the members of the First Aliyah who had recently arrived, who were unfamiliar with the East (and, in the opinion of this group, were uninterested in gaining such familiarity), and behaved with Western arrogance toward both the Arab population and the Mizrahi Jewish population that formed the great majority of the Old Yishuv in Jerusalem and the other holy cities. They viewed the Sephardic Jews as “Asiatic” and unworthy of associating with the “Europeans.” See, for example, Berlovitz (1996, p.122). See also regarding the fierce argument between the Ashkenazic and Sephardic Jews in Kushta (Istanbul) during 1910-1911, Tsipper (2001, pp. 443-446).

<sup>7</sup> An article that was sent from Germany and anonymously translated into Ladino.

established the Hakoah organization in Grätz. To found this organization, the young Jews had to fight both the internal forces of Jews who opposed them who were afraid of public nationalist demonstrations, along with a struggle against the external forces of the Christian sport organizations, particularly the G.A.K. association. They conspired against the Hakoah soccer team, not having it participate in games, but when they saw it met the same standards as the Christian teams, they included it in tournaments with the goal being victory for the Christian teams and humiliating defeat for the Jewish teams. The Hakoah soccer team, despite being comprised of amateurs, won all the games including the most decisive – the championship against the G.A.K. itself.

This happened in July 1923, and this date will not be quickly forgotten among the Jewish population, whose joy knew no bounds, notes Freiburger. After the match, hordes of Germans wanted to riot and get revenge on the Jews. They threw stones and struck blows, but this did not prevent the Hakoah team from being the strongest in Steiermark. There were sympathetic articles in the press after a long period during which news items had lacked appreciation for the team. It is important to note that *El Maccabeo*, most of whose writers were Sephardic Jews, provided a platform for an Ashkenazic Jewish journalist: “We must hope that similar organizations will be formed throughout the world to strengthen our nation” ends Freiburger (*El Maccabeo*, 1931, p.32).

This article was apparently translated to strengthen Maccabi of Thessaloniki, who were in a similar situation to that of Hakoah in Grätz, and also had to grapple with the Greek soccer teams that were closed to Jews.

The above reviews show the Jews in Thessaloniki anxiously and tensely followed the anti-Semitic outbreaks in other communities. The purpose of these reviews were to create internal unity within the Thessalonikian Jewish community itself, in the wake of hostile forces within and without that community. However, while the writers writing about current issues envisioned the destruction of the Jews in other communities, they certainly did not guess the future repercussions on the Jews of Thessaloniki.

#### 4. Summary

During the initial period of *El Maccabeo*'s publication, a feeling existed that literature could change reality. From studying the articles, it can be seen the authors hoped and believed they could change reality, at least a little, and influence the political, social, religious, and Zionist course of events within and outside the Thessaloniki community. It would seem the writers slowly came to terms with their inability to effect such change.

*El Maccabeo* initially fulfilled an essential role during a particular time, but once the writers and editor felt their contribution was going unnoticed and they were not affecting the course of events, they lost their will and motivation to continue publishing the journal. In addition, *El Maccabeo* was an annual, and even though we know after the fact that it was influential and left its mark on the Jewish community of Thessaloniki, as the years passed the writers themselves felt it was not having any decisive impact.

*El Maccabeo* lasted longer than other journals published in the same time or place, and reported events in Thessaloniki and other Jewish communities throughout the Ottoman Empire and Europe. *El Maccabeo* suffered, as noted, from external conditions that were sub-optimal for continued publication. These included the great fire, few resources, changing editors, an increasing anti-Semitic atmosphere, the large number of Zionist organizations that began to publish their own journal and writers moving to write in other journals – all these led to its closure. However, its publication years will be remembered as a period of encouraging the Zionist enterprise in all the Jewish communities, concern for the Jews scattered throughout the Diaspora, and a sense of mutual responsibility and personal and communal involvement.

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